

Army Lessons Learned and Successful TTPs for Hurricane Mitch Humanitarian Assistance: JTF Commander's Initial Impressions

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Hurricane Mitch, which struck Central America in late October 1998, was the Atlantic basin's fourth strongest hurricane in recorded history with sustained winds of 180 MPH. To augment the pre-existing Joint Task Force (JTF) operating in Honduras, the United States Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM) formed a separate JTF in mid-November 1998, to facilitate host-nation long-term recovery efforts within the Joint Operations Area (JOA) of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. Led by an Army assistant division commander (ADC), this new JTF consisted of three task forces (TFs), each responsible for humanitarian assistance (HA) operations in one of the countries in the JOA. The TF commanders in the three countries were from different services -- the Army, the Air Force, and the Marines.

The JTF faced many significant challenges from the very beginning. The total JOA spanned 100,357 square miles. The destruction in the region included 2,860 dead, over a thousand missing, and 1.04 million displaced people, as well as 172 damaged bridges. Since the U.S. had almost no military presence in any of the three countries in the JOA, the new JTF had to overcome problems in medical, logistical, engineering, aviation, and humanitarian assistance operations that the pre-existing JTF did not face. The JTF also planned and coordinated for each of the port, medical, base operations, airfield, and other support facilities that it occupied. Additionally, most of the personnel and units assigned to assist in the JOA came from the continental U.S. (CONUS) and had little expertise or knowledge in the region. The JTF staff was organized around a CONUS Corps Support Group (CSG) headquarters, which had to quickly deploy, establish its base of operations, and begin support of arriving units. In addition to the many challenges the JTF faced, it also had some unique opportunities, such as improving U.S.-Nicaraguan relations through humanitarian assistance operations in Nicaragua, where no American troops have operated in decades.

Although this was a Joint operation, many of the lessons learned derived from this operation are applicable to the Army. In fact, the Army provided over 70-percent of the personnel in the JTF force structure. This article provides some of the JTF commander's initial impressions on Army lessons learned and successful tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) employed during humanitarian assistance operations in the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch.

1. A headquarters with responsibility for humanitarian assistance must have experts early in the operation to conduct the mission analysis and initial planning. The initial assessment laid the groundwork for the entire operation. The JTF commander emphasized that "success was set up during the first three weeks of the operation." To assist in the analysis and planning, USSOUTHCOM provided the JTF with a Deployable Joint Task Force Augmentation Cell (DJTFAC), a nucleus of 20-25 planners to support contingency operations. Previously used in exercises only, this organization supported a contingency operation for the first time in the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch. DJTFAC members had regional and country expertise. Of all the experts on hand, however, the doctor and the engineer were the two most essential to the success of the humanitarian assistance mission. They were responsible for assessing the medical and engineering requirements, the main efforts in the operation.
2. Use the experts to plan all phases of the operation, to include the redeployment. The DJTFAC was available to the commander for 30 days. Five days before releasing them from the operation, the commander directed them to plan the redeployment. Because of the tremendous effort required to work three simultaneous port operations in three different countries, as was the case during the initial deployment, the JTF adopted a step-down method to the redeployment. Based on an assessment of the damage in each of the three countries, the country with the least damage was accorded 30 days for operations, while the worst damaged was accorded the most days at 50. This allowed the JTF to focus on each redeployment separately.
3. The commander must establish guiding principles for the operation that supports his vision for the desired end-state. In the operations order brief, the JTF specified its end-state as follows: JTF "will have assisted host-nation (HN) efforts to reinstate ground connectivity, rehabilitate critical facilities and infrastructure, ensuring the HN's ability to return to pre-Mitch conditions and continue long-term recovery and development. Requirements will have been identified for long-term recovery ensuring HN's

are capable of preventing major outbreak of disease, and continuing commercial/economic progress. Success will be defined as a smooth transition of the JOA to [another USSOUTHCOM JTF] without major incident, injury or damaged equipment, and safely re-deployed to home station.. " Although each unit, such as Civil Affairs, Medical, and Engineering, sought to gain more of the JTF's resources to maximize their own contributions, the commander had to adopt a "drop-back field of view" to see the big picture and set priorities to support the JTF's end-state. To do this, the commander developed guiding principles, loosely grouped under force protection and coordination/cooperation, to help his staff and subordinate leaders exercise initiative in support of the desired end-state (see Supplement to Paragraph 3: JTF Commander's Guiding Principles at end of article).

4. The commander must have fast and efficient transportation. The area of operations consisted of three countries, spanning 100,357 square miles. To coordinate with the national-level ministers and the U.S. ambassadors in the host nations, the commander needed transportation to move him quickly to the necessary meetings. Choosing a Salvadoran air base as the location of his headquarters, the JTF commander had access to both the helicopters under his operational command, as well as fixed-wing aircraft from U.S. Army South.

5. Unit commanders lead their forward-deployed elements in support of humanitarian assistance mission. Subordinate unit leaders or staff officers often led units that deployed only forward elements to assist with the humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations. Commanders need to take the same approach to humanitarian assistance missions as they would their wartime contingency missions. Consequently, they should lead their forward-deployed elements. In fact, unit commanders should view the humanitarian assistance operation as their real-world contingency operation, requiring their unique commander's perspective, higher level of maturity, and greater knowledge and understanding of the political-military environment.

6. Leaders' reconnaissance in the area of operations is essential. A leaders' reconnaissance of the area of operations, early in the planning phase, provides unit commanders with essential information to tailor their units for the mission. The size of the party should be small (less than five) to avoid placing a strain on the available HN support, which is probably limited during the early stages of a disaster relief operation. The reconnaissance element should consist of at least one officer to grasp the "big picture," and one noncommissioned officer to view soldier support issues that arise from the mission.

7. Supporting headquarters staff element must come from a pre-existing Table of Organization and Equipment (TO&E) unit. Because the JTF is organized on an ad-hoc basis, there is a great impulse to assemble the supporting headquarters element in the same fashion. This is a mistake because the ad-hoc staff lacks cohesion and standing operating procedures (SOPs). Conversely, a TO&E unit that is tasked to provide and support a headquarters element will not only furnish all the required key personnel, but also will deploy with the needed support equipment, facilities, and staff SOPs.

8. Synchronize the deployment of personnel with the arrival of their equipment during the deployment phase. Many soldiers arrived in the area of operations prior to the arrival of their equipment. This negated training time at home station and slowed humanitarian assistance operations. Units could have spent their time more effectively at home station conducting pre-deployment training in areas such as country orientation (with the focus of providing situational and cultural awareness), force protection, and combat lifesaver training. Moreover, without the proper tools, these soldiers could not effectively conduct their humanitarian assistance mission. The Reception, Staging, Onward movement, and Integration (RSO&I) process is just as applicable in humanitarian assistance operations as in wartime operations. The JTF must synchronize personnel and equipment flow to build humanitarian assistance capability as surely as a combat unit must build its "combat power" in a wartime contingency deployment.

9. Deploy an advance party with adequate equipment and supplies to receive and support the unit's main body in an austere environment. During the deployment into theater, units arrived into the area of operations without adequate equipment and rations. In fact, many units arrived without adequate shelter, equipment, food and water, which had been placed aboard ship for transportation into theater. This created a tremendous logistical strain on the newly formed JTF headquarters operating in an austere environment.

10. Train and certify as many combat lifesavers as possible. Combat lifesavers were essential to the execution of the disaster relief operation, especially during the initial phases of the operation, when limited medical assets were available. Units should focus on combat lifesaver training during pre-deployment preparation. Train all

available deploying unit personnel as intensely as possible. Coordinate with non-deploying medical units at home station to conduct the training.

11. Emphasize the information operations (IO) campaign as an essential element of the humanitarian assistance mission. Humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations offer unique opportunities to build trust and friendship between the U.S. and the HN. This was especially true in Nicaragua, a country that the U.S. has had minimal cooperation with for many years. A well thought-out and synchronized IO campaign, coordinated by a Land Information Warfare Activity (LIWA) Forward Support Team (FST) from the outset of the operation, would have brought about a much more positive HN perception of the U.S. military. Additionally, the IO effort would have strengthened the U.S. and HN bond by cultivating deeper trust and friendship.

12. Conduct detailed planning for contracting support and resource funding. When units arrived in theater, they experienced difficulty purchasing some required items since resource funding was incomplete. In addition, units could not access home-station financial support. Moreover, contracting officers were not immediately available to assist units in ordering and contracting required supplies. This situation slowed initial humanitarian assistance efforts.

Humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations are often joint operations. However, because of the Army's extensive role in supporting these operations, many of the lessons learned are applicable to the Army in the areas of medical, logistical, aviation, engineering, and base support operations. Lessons learned from Hurricane Mitch will significantly increase the Army's knowledge on how to better plan, prepare and execute future humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations. CALL is continuing to work with units involved in the relief operation to collect more information in the form of after-action reports and operational documents and will make that information available in the CALL data base, accessible through the CALL website.

Supplement to Paragraph 3: JTF Commander's Guiding Principles

The JTF Commander provided the following guiding principles for his O-6 commanders during humanitarian assistance operations in Central America after Hurricane Mitch:

Force protection is the key driver and must be defined up front. Establish a force protection working group to monitor all aspects of the operation.

- **Control the environment.** Get situationally aware and decide the most dangerous events/activities surrounding the work routine. Establish control measures to minimize exposure to risk.
- **Do not operate on the margins.** After transition from the crisis phase to the rehabilitation phase, all operations, to include movement by air or ground must be deliberately planned and executed. The JTF is here to add stability, not calamity or chaos.
- **Publish General Order No. 1.** Establish basic guidelines that are common to all service members, such as no alcohol, and standing rules of engagement. Additionally, provide guidelines that are usually situationally dependent within the operating environment, such as conducting operations only during daylight, imposing curfew from dusk to dawn, and traveling with a minimum of two vehicles with armed security and communications.
- **No independent operators.** Be consistent and execute the plan. Coordinate with various agencies, and at various levels to include embassies, HN ministries, media and local officials to ensure the JTF projects are in concert with HN priorities and within the bounds of U.S. foreign policy. Give clear, up-front guidance to internal elements, such as public affairs operations, Joint Information Bureau (JIB) and civil affairs, to ensure that their messages and themes are not contradictory to those of the commander.
- **Integrate HN military at every juncture.** Working with the HN military will be a unique experience and provide a lasting bond common to all soldiers.

Having HN military working along side will improve situational awareness and provide better all around security.

Coordination/Cooperation

- **Do not turn away help.** Organizations from all services and directions have come to support humanitarian assistance operations. Through proper coordination, the JTF can open many doors and accelerate the participation of these units in HA operations. However, numerous government activities, military agencies, civilian entities, Private Volunteer Organizations (PVOs)/Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)/International Organizations (IOs) will also attempt to slide into the joint operations area unannounced. These agencies have their own agenda, but, nevertheless, must come under the control of the commander. The JTF must ensure that they understand the commander's intent and concept of operations and that they are aware of force protection issues.
- **Do not re-create in-place systems.** Maintain contacts and links with the U.S. elements within the host country or theater of operations. Certainly the embassies are key, but, in this case, an in-place JTF located in Honduras provides the primary link for logistics flow and U.S. Army, South (USARSO), located in Panama, provides the link for contracting, initial civil-military humanitarian support, port operations and services which require transportation into our JOA. Use these commands and the services to the JTF's benefit. These commands have a long-term relationship to maintain and a continued presence after our JTF has departed.
- **All visitors are VIPs.** Visitors to the area have a strong impact on the outcome of the existing operations and will most likely influence the future of overall operations and U.S. presence in the theater. Congressmen, Senators, Department of Defense officials and senior government leadership will most certainly develop long-term foreign policy direction and funding, based on the impressions during their visit.
- **Learn the capabilities of the other services.** This will help in building a cohesive team, optimizing capabilities and putting the talents of others to use more efficiently. Find and put all of the JTF's Host-Nation language speakers to good use.
- **Make a meaningful contribution.** Be a good neighbor; get out to see the projects and work sites. Respect the people and their country. Gain cultural perspective...a lasting memento. If the environment is restrictive, then organize tours.